

PROPOSED VA BENEFIT CUT ANGERS ELDERLY, DISABLED VETS

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Vietnam veterans and their families participate in the Vietnam Veterans Welcome Home Ceremony on May 20, 2017, at Fort McCoy, Wis. Scott T. Sturkol/Army
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The plan to cut financial support for aging and disabled veterans included in President Donald Trump's \$1.1 trillion federal budget proposal has led to bitterness and confusion among the estimated 225,000 vets who could lose the payments.

The reductions may also trigger a political backlash against the president, who made reforming and increasing support for the [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) a major part of his campaign against Hillary Clinton.

"Make that guy in the White House keep his promise to all of us veterans, lest we all fall by the wayside and be left on the battlefield," said a former [Army](#) staff sergeant who served in Vietnam.

"Please don't do this to us," said a sailor who served on ships in the Tonkin Gulf during the Vietnam War. "My wife and I already live our later years in constant uncertainty. We thought our VA benefits were fairly safe."

"I have become aware that President Trump's VA budget sets to screw Vietnam veterans first in line by eliminating the unemployability benefit for those of us who actually served and sacrificed who

have reached the age of Social Security benefits," said a former [Navy](#) lieutenant who flew the EP-3E version of the [P-3 Orion](#) surveillance aircraft in Vietnam.

"What can we do? Based on this, veterans would be in better shape if a Democrat had been elected," said another vet. "I voted for Trump because of promises of helping the veterans, not taking away. I surely hope I don't regret voting for him."

The comments came from a flurry of emails from veterans and [spouses](#) to Military.com in response to a story last week about the proposal in the White House budget plan to [cut the Individual Unemployability \(IU\) benefit](#) in part to pay for an expansion of the Choice program, which allows veterans to seek health care in the private sector.

Veterans service organizations have also been flooded with calls and emails voicing concerns about the budget proposals and potential cuts to IU benefits.

Veterans eligible now for IU have a 60-100 percent disability rating but are all paid at the 100 percent rate because a service-connected disability makes them unable to work. The budget proposal would cut off IU payments once the veteran reaches the minimum age for Social Security.

The proposed cuts could impact about 225,000 vets currently receiving IU. At a House hearing last month, VA Secretary Dr. David Shulkin said that about 7,000 of those vets are over the age of 80.

The White House Office of Management and Budget proposed a budget for the VA of \$186.5 billion for fiscal 2018, which begins Oct. 1, an increase of about 6 percent over fiscal 2017.

OMB projected \$3.6 billion in savings from trims to benefits. Much of the savings would go toward a proposed \$2.9 billion expansion of the Choice program for fiscal 2018, which begins Oct. 1.

Some of the emails from veterans received by Military.com questioned why IU should be cut to pay for Choice.

"Taking money from me to give to profit-making medical providers is wrong. You are screwing me and my wife," said a former [Marine](#) sergeant who served with the 26th Marines at Khe Sanh. "It makes no sense for [the Department of Veterans Affairs] to have to fund the Choice program.

"We did our part by serving, and so many gave their lives. Maybe some of those supporting the bill should visit the VA hospitals with veterans suffering and just waiting for their final call. Then tell their families, 'He was a good man,' " said the sergeant.

Major veterans organizations slammed the budget proposals as soon as they were issued and also questioned Shulkin's push to expand the Choice program.

"We are very concerned the administration's request to make the Veterans Choice Program a permanent, mandatory program could lead to a gradual erosion of the VA health care system," the Veterans of Foreign Wars said in written testimony to a hearing of the House Veterans Affairs Committee last month.

At the same hearing, Rep. Mark Takano, D-Calif., said of the proposed cuts to IU, "If a veteran was provided this benefit because of the inability to maintain gainful employment, particularly at a young

age, he or she would not have been able to pay for Social Security or put money into a 401(k) or other retirement savings account."

He asked Shulkin, who was testifying, "If you end the [IU] payments for veterans like this, don't you risk plunging them into poverty?"

Shulkin responded that the VA is "sensitive to the issue" but had to find savings to pay for other programs. The change in eligibility for IU would save an estimated \$3.2 billion in fiscal 2018 and \$40.8 billion over 10 years, he said.

"This is a way we think of appropriately utilizing the mandatory funds and looking at where we can make the [IU] program more responsible," Shulkin said.

John Rowan, national president of Vietnam Veterans of America, said in a statement to the hearing, "We're extremely alarmed by this budget proposal, because this is the opposite of what President Trump promised veterans."

Many veterans echoed that sentiment.

"I am appalled at the proposed cut," an [Air Force](#) veteran said in an email to Military.com. "At first, this cut may seem logical, but the logic is flawed in many cases. Sure, there are some vets with large Social Security benefit checks, but it is also so true that many vets will have such small checks that this cut would leave them destitute."

The wife of a veteran said, "My 70-year-old husband will be one of the thousands to lose his IU benefit if this [legislation](#) is approved. Frankly, it would be devastation to us financially."

There was also confusion and anxiety among aging vets about having no way of knowing how the proposals will work out in Congress.

"I have been receiving IU for three years. I also receive [Social Security]," one said. "If IU is cut, how does this affect me?"

Other vets worried about what would happen to their spouses.

"If I die, my wife can apply for the DIC [Dependency and Compensation] benefit, but without the DIC benefit, my wife would only receive my Social Security benefit of around \$1,500 a month," a vet said.

"She has told me that if this becomes her income, she will be forced to sell the house and take the selling price of the house and attempt to get into a low-income housing." (DIC is a tax-free benefit paid to eligible survivors of service members who died in the line of duty or veterans whose deaths resulted from a service-related injury or disease.)

At a White House briefing Wednesday, Shulkin said he is fully aware of the veterans service organizations' complaints as he again defended the proposed cuts for IU.

"I have such great admiration and respect for VSOs, and I understand their passion and I share their commitment that it is so important that this country honor its responsibility to our veterans," he said.

However, "that doesn't mean that you don't go back and revisit programs that have been around for a long time and figure out different ways to use those resources, as long as they are directed to helping veterans," Shulkin said. "Now, I understand there's not always going to be agreement. This is Washington, and we're always going to get passion over important topics."

In a statement in response to Shulkin's remarks, American Legion National Commander Charles E. Schmidt said that he welcomed Shulkin's "candor and commitment" to reforming the VA, but "last week, our headquarters was overrun with questions and concerns about the disastrous impact proposed changes to the IU program would have on our aging veteran community.

"We are also alarmed by the cannibalization of services needed for the Choice program," he said. "It is a 'stealth' privatization attempt, which The American Legion fully opposes."

-- *Richard Sisk can be reached at Richard.Sisk@Military.com.*

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